

Sanskritic Albion: Heterotemporalities in Colonial Knowledge Production

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I NTRODUCTION: THE LAMA'S SMILE

It is hard to impress college students who were born in a world fully permeated by the Internet and who came of age during a pandemic. Yet I usually manage to garner a smile from them when I show them in class a seventeenth-century drawing of a llama happily riding Noah's Ark. The drawing is found in Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala's history and cosmography of the Incas, written for King Philip III of Spain in about 1615 to denounce the injustices of colonial rule in Peru. But why is a llama riding Noah's Ark? I explain to my students how Guaman Poma, a Christian, simply took the next logical step in a well-established natural and scientific corollary of his time: if biblical history were true history, if animals after the universal flood were descendants of Noah's animals, then it follows that a llama—a pair of them actually—rode with Noah and his sons.

While I show this image to my students to attract their interest, in reality this episode betrays a larger story, one that I let my students piece together throughout the course. The ark-riding llama is not merely an attempt to implant Andean realities into the colonizers' frameworks. Perhaps we could think of it as uncovering a framework that early modern scholars supposed was in place: a universality—that is, a unified, worldwide scheme of history and geography—based on the assumed historicity of the Bible. This same universal framework was shared and sought in other parts of the colonial world. In 1786, William Jones, an Oxford-trained scholar working as a judge in Calcutta at the service of the British East India Company, delivered a

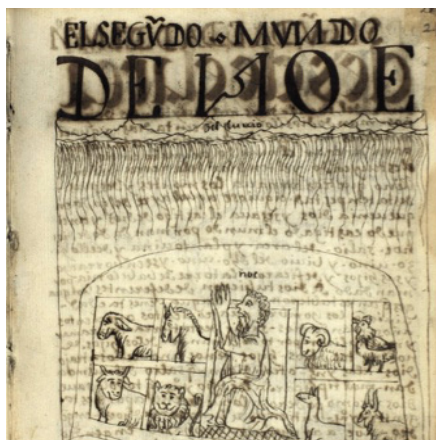


Image 1: Drawing of Noah's Ark by Guaman Poma. A llama rides along with other Eurasian animals.

now-famous address at the Asiatic Society in which he described morphological and grammatical commonalities between some European languages, like Greek and Latin, and the languages of India known to him: Sanskrit, Hindustani, and Persian. This insight, sometimes hailed as the foundational moment for historical linguistics, was for Jones not the “discovery” of the Proto-Indo-European linguistic family, but the “uncovering” of biblical universality, what Thomas Trautmann has called “Mosaick ethnology.” Jones thought to hear, in the similarities between pronouns and verbal suffixes across languages, the echoes of the pre-Babelian language of the Bible, and in their dissemination on the earth the proof of Noah’s progeny repopulating the post-deluge world.¹

Guaman Poma and Jones were engaged in similar processes of epistemological translation, attempting to integrate unfamiliar knowledge (Andean animals and Indian languages, respectively) into a universal biblical framework. Their methods—visual integration in Guaman Poma’s case, linguistic analysis in Jones’s—represent parallel approaches to constructing a universal scheme that could accommodate both European and non-European knowledge. While the framework of Guaman Poma and Jones hinged on the historicity of the Bible, this was not an uncritical presupposition forced onto different epistemologies and histories. As Alison Bashford and others have argued in a recent collection of essays, the encounter of colonial Western science with epistemologies outside Europe did not simply displace these epistemologies and cosmologies but in many cases integrated them into the heart of modern geosciences.² Bashford argues that modern science has been afforded “a special capacity to universalize or globalize a particular epistemology.”³ An enduring aspect of this universalized epistemology is the complete secularization of time, an absorption of multiple histories into the unified and empty timeline of geological time. Yet this absorption hides an existential sensation for the people inhabiting the world before this development: that they could live in multiple temporalities with which they were familiar.⁴

The existence of this early modern framework based on biblical historicity is well known, as Trautmann’s take on Jones’s project attests. My aim in this essay is to explore how placing different cases in conversation reveals not only a fuller picture of this framework, but multiple, competing temporalities that operated according to their own logic, what I call “alternative universals.” The idea to query these alternative universals emerged from conversations with colleagues at the Stanford Humanities Center (SHC) and across campus. Juan Carlos Garzón (California State University, Fresno) explored the happy llama and its symbolic weight in Andean cosmography in the weekly workshop organized by the Center for Medieval and Early Modern Studies. The similarities, however, do not stop at the motives and the framework used, like the

¹ While Jones did not elaborate on this biblical framework in the *Third Discourse*, he developed nonsystematically the idea throughout his oeuvre. For example, he considered that languages from Central Mexico, now known to belong to the Uto-Aztecan languages, were also part of this big biblical family. For a full development of the idea of “Mosaick ethnology,” see Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*; Garland Cannon has written a biography of Jones, giving him the full cultural-hero treatment. See Cannon, *The Life and Mind of Oriental Jones: Sir William Jones, the Father of Modern Linguistics*; See Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe, 1650–1900* for a nuanced take on Jones and his relation to the so-called native informants.

² For several cases of this, see Alison Bashford et al., eds., *New Earth Histories: Geo-Cosmologies and the Making of the Modern World*.

³ Alison Bashford, et al., “Introduction,” in Bashford et al., *New Earth Histories*, 3.

⁴ Alison Bashford, et al., “Introduction,” in Bashford et al., *New Earth Histories*, 11.

Bible. In conversation with Jaime Marroquín (Western Oregon University) during his yearlong fellowship at the SHC, we explored commonalities between early modern Mexico and India in terms of methodologies deployed in colonial encounters with unfamiliar epistemic terrains. Examining these alternative universals and their construction, I argue that the history of early modern knowledge production can be understood not as a teleological progression toward modern science but rather as a complex field that was later flattened by imperial historiography. In this essay I take a couple of "episodes" to historicize this modern rational universal of which we are heirs by looking at the messy coexistence of its antecedents. These encounters created what Charles Hirschkind calls "heterotemporalities": temporal frameworks that "articulate a place and time that intersects with but also exceeds" the boundaries of contemporary periodicity and historiography.⁵ Unlike the teleological narrative of scientific progress, these heterotemporalities allowed multiple pasts and universals to coexist, creating spaces where biblical frameworks could accommodate both European and non-European knowledge without subordinating either to a singular progressivist timeline. Though we now know that indigenous categories and analytical frameworks were part of what would become "universal" and were not merely repositories of raw data as was previously believed, we tend to see these encounters and their results either as a quaint story, as in the case of Guaman Poma's llama, or as the discovery—sometimes accidental, like Jones's insight on Indo-European languages—of a modern scientific principle, a stepping stone into the terrain of modern, rational, European science.⁶ In both cases, the colonial encounter stresses the teleology of the modern history of science identified with the European Enlightenment.

Against this teleological reading, I present two more attempts at constructing heterotemporalities as alternative universals. These heterotemporalities reflect what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called the "colonial-cosmopolitan" nature of scientific knowledge, shaped by colonial power structures while also resulting from exchanges among different knowledge systems.⁷ By recovering these alternative universals, we can see that colonial knowledge production generated not failures or successes on a teleological path to modern science but multiple competing schemes that operated according to their own temporal logics.

Thus, I do not offer cases whose outcome was the construction of positive knowledge fully aligned with modern scientific frameworks. Such cases—like Jones's "discovery" of Indo-European languages—abound in literature, but they tend to strengthen the teleology of modern rational frameworks. Instead, I present two cases from colonial India that further illuminate the varied and conscious attempts at building a different universality. The first case involves Francis Wilford, a contemporary of Jones at the Asiatic Society who similarly sought to integrate Indian knowledge into a biblical framework, but through geographical rather than linguistic analysis. The second case examines Raja Krishnachandra, a Bengali ruler who engaged with European astronomical knowledge while maintaining historical frameworks linking India and Egypt that colonial science would eventually reject. These cases should be read not as either curious stories or cautionary tales but as evidence that multiple constructions of universality coexisted before the imperial consolidation of a singular, teleological narrative of scientific progress.

⁵ Charles Hirschkind, *The Feeling of History: Islam, Romanticism, and Andalusia*, 1.

⁶ See Raj, *Relocating Modern Science*, especially "Introduction," for a critique of the long-held idea of the local as feeding into the "universal" of modern science, like rivers into the ocean.

⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, Foreword, in Bashford et al., *New Earth Histories*, xvii.



A Shared Past: Francis Wilford and a Unified View of World History

In the second half of the eighteenth century, as the East India Company relied increasingly on Bengal's land taxation revenue, the colonial government appointed James Rennell (1742–1830) as the first surveyor general to create accurate maps. Contemporary scholars argue that Rennell's project became a “manifestation of Enlightenment encyclopedic mentality,” uniting geographical and political knowledge of India while imagining a unified territory under a sovereign entity.⁸ Like many efforts at colonial governance, this was a collaborative effort between British officials and local functionaries who were familiar with the regions under the company's administration. And while the collaborative nature of the mapping of India has been well-known, cartography has been identified as one of the processes that established the “scientific” or enlightened gaze upon India, almost as a vertical transfer of techniques and epistemologies, from Britain down to India.⁹

One of the British army officials hired as surveyor was Lt. Francis Wilford, who spent his first few years in India engaged not only in cartographic endeavors but in actual inspection of distant terrains, a perilous task that was mostly delegated to locals, not to British officers. However, despite his successes in the surveyor's office, Wilford was passed over for promotion to Rennell's position when the latter returned to England. Abandoning the surveyor career, he took a position in the newly created Sanskrit College in Benares, an institution founded by the British to promote and preserve what they thought was the immemorial and ancient culture of the Hindus, embodied in the figures of the pandits, a Sanskrit word meaning “learned” but denoting Hindu men, mainly Brahmins, who had chosen a scholarly career and trained under the traditional Sanskrit system of the region.¹⁰ Wilford also became an active member of the Asiatic Society founded by Jones. There, he published extensively on Hindu geographical knowledge and history, with Jones himself responding positively to Wilford's early contributions.

The reception of Wilford's work and the broader Asiatic Society publications—mainly broadcast through the journal *Asiatick Researches*, the brainchild of William Jones—reveals how universalizing frameworks in this period were not distinct systems that merely coexisted but rather overlapping and porous constructions. When the Asiatic Society's journal was translated into French, figures like Georges Cuvier and Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, pioneers of what would become modern biological taxonomy, engaged with natural history findings from India, while orientalist Louis-Mathieu Langlès praised Wilford's historical insights.¹¹ This simultaneous engagement with biblical frameworks like Jones's and emerging scientific methodologies by the same intellectual community demonstrates the heterotemporality of this moment. These were not separate domains but overlapping frameworks of universality that scholars moved among fluidly before the imperial project later imposed a singular narrative of scientific progress.

⁸ Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843*, 5.

⁹ David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800–1856*; See Phillip B. Wagoner, “Precolonial Intellectuals and the Production of Colonial Knowledge,” 783–814, for a brief history of the long academic discussion about the so-called native informants in South Asian scholarship.

¹⁰ Vasudha Dalmia, “Sanskrit Scholars and Pandits of the Old School: The Benares Sanskrit College and the Constitution of Authority in the Late Nineteenth Century,” 321–37. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23448394>.

¹¹ *Recherches Asiatiques; Ou, Mémoires de La Société Établie Au Bengale Pour Faire Des Recherches Sur L'histoire et Les Antiquités, Les Arts, Les Sciences et La Littérature de l'Asie*. 2 vols. Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1805.

At the Sanskrit College, Wilford hired a host of pandits who provided him with a plethora of manuscripts on diverse subjects. Perhaps because of his own background as a surveyor, Wilford took special interest in any old work dealing with geography and history. The more he asked his pandits to deliver morsels of ancient Hindu knowledge on geography and global history, the more manuscripts the pandits produced for him. Wilford collected so much information on different subjects that he published articles amounting to five hundred or more pages over ten years, starting in the 1790s in *Asiatick Researches*. However, his articles, his ideas, and his reputation would suffer a severe blow years later when damning evidence of forgery came forward.

The nature of Wilford's findings was not starkly different from the claims made by William Jones. Unbeknownst to Wilford, Jones had stumbled upon the Proto-Indo-European family of languages while looking for the proto-Babelian language of the Bible, but in reality Jones's main project was to ascertain the historicity of the entire biblical framework, as we saw in the introduction. Jones's work, however, reveals an important distinction between the logic of "discovery" that would later be imposed on his findings and his own sense of "uncovering" relationships that had always existed but had been obscured by time and translation. While Jones built much of his argument on solid linguistic evidence and clearly parallel myths (such as the flood story of Manu rescued by Vishnu's fish avatar Matsya), he also reached for more tenuous connections between Hindu and biblical narratives. For example, Jones interpreted the story of Narasimha, Vishnu's half-lion avatar bursting from a pillar to destroy a demon, as an allegorical retelling of the Tower of Babel's destruction.¹² While modern historiography celebrates Jones for "discovering" Indo-European languages, he himself was engaged in uncovering what he believed were preexisting connections that confirmed biblical universality.¹³

Participating in the same "uncovering" framework, Wilford thought he had found further, irrefutable proof of Noah's story and lineage in a Sanskrit work, the generic-sounding *Padma-purana*. Like Jones, Wilford encountered the story of Manu and the god-fish Matsya, which bears obvious resemblance to Noah's story and to the Mesopotamian flood myth told in the story of Gilgamesh. But Wilford encountered a version of the Manu story that contained further details, closely resembling the biblical tale. In this version, Wilford thought to find the true Sanskrit name for Noah, Satyavrata. According to the purported Sanskrit text, this Sanskritic Noah had three sons, one of whom he cursed after becoming intoxicated, mirroring the biblical narrative. Wilford, however, was unable to recognize that Satyavrata is another name for Manu, not a novel "uncovering" but a different telling.¹⁴

Perhaps the most dramatic finding was the identification of the sacred islands of Hindu cosmography with the empirical geography of the world. In cosmological or cosmographic literature, like the extensive genre of the *Puranas*, the world was divided into seven islands arranged as the petals of a lotus flower around the mythical Mount Meru. Wilford's willingness to take at face value these texts, which even Hindu astronomers did not interpret literally, made him believe that he had encountered manuscripts with advanced geographical knowledge that posited that the original holy land of Hinduism lay in the West and that Hindus were acquainted with its name

¹² William Jones, "Discourse Ninth on the Origins and Families of Nations," 136.

¹³ The critique against the logic of discovery in knowledge formation, especially in colonial encounters, has been well established. For some examples, see Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*.

¹⁴ Francis Wilford, "On Egypt and Other Countries Adjacent to the Ca'Li' River, or Nile of Ethiopia, from the Ancient Books of the Hindus," 312.

and idea—just like, Wilford said, “distant Muselmans with Arabia.” The name of the holy island of Hinduism in Sanskrit was Śvetadvīpa, the “White Island.” It did not take much for Wilford to claim that this name was a perfect facsimile of the Greek name for England, Albion.¹⁵ Thus, for Wilford this bit of ancient geographical knowledge fully integrated the ancient world in a single timeline (a biblical one) and in a single geographical framework. Instead of being discarded, he believed, ancient and non-European knowledge should be integrated into the same framework. For almost ten years Wilford kept publishing article after article on different subjects, especially history and geography. All his findings he claimed to have checked against Sanskrit originals, and he even purported to have shown William Jones some of the most fantastic findings, pointing at a universal framework for world history. However, in the same publication in which he announced the discovery of Sanskrit Albion, Wilford made a terrible acknowledgment: he claimed to have recently noticed, by mere chance, a smudge on the paper under the Sanskrit word Śvetadvīpa when he was working on the article. To his own dismay, he realized that a different word had existed there, which his pandit had erased and written over. Then it dawned on Wilford that the extreme similarities of histories between European and Indian mythologies were the result of his pandit tweaking some details to make them align better.¹⁶

As Wilford confessed this damning smudge, he still defended his overall approach and findings, claiming that, while some details were definitely manufactured by his pandit, the structural correspondence between myths “evinces also some remote communication, at least, if not some affinity, at an early period, between the nations among which we find these legends equally current.”¹⁷ Arguing this claim allowed Wilford to accomplish two things. First, he portrayed himself as the victim of a ruse by the cheating pandit. Second, it left intact the validity and historicity of the Sanskrit corpus he thought he had found.

Convinced that, despite the forgeries, he had stumbled upon the key needed to unite ancient and modern, Indian and European geographical frameworks, Wilford created a synthesis of Aristotelian climate theory, colonial surveys, and Hindu Puranic geography. This moment of synthesis reveals that alternative universals often operated on the same evidentiary regime that would later support modern scientific frameworks, but were interpreted through different narrative structures. What distinguished Wilford’s universal from later scientific geographical knowledge was not only the evidence itself—and in fact both relied on careful observation, textual analysis, and comparative methods—but the interpretive framework that organized this evidence. The following image shows this synthesis: decades of surveying had yielded enough information to map the Ganges River to its Himalayan origins in Climate III of Aristotle’s scheme, while Wilford simultaneously positioned the mythical river Bhadra at England’s latitude, north of Mount Meru, the center of the world for Hindu cosmology (no real mountain was ever associated with Mount Meru). This integration of empirical colonial cartography with Puranic cosmography demonstrates how heterotemporalities functioned not as separate domains but as overlapping

¹⁵ Francis Wilford, “An Essay on the Sacred Isles in the West, with Other Essays Connected with That Work,” 245–375.

¹⁶ Nigel Leask, “Francis Wilford and the Colonial Construction of Hindu Geography, 1799–1822,” 204–22. Leask sees in this case an extreme case of “colonial mimicry,” perhaps a form of resistance; C. A. Bayly, however, has shown that the unnamed Pandit was indeed a swindler. The Pandit fired other translators and appropriated their salaries, building a mansion for himself on the banks of the Ganges. C. A. Bayly, “Orientalists, Informants and Critics in Benares, 1790–1860,” 105.

¹⁷ Wilford, “An Essay on the Sacred Isles in the West,” 375.

interpretive systems. When nineteenth-century scholarship later dismissed Wilford's work as fraud, it didn't reject the entire biblical framework that Jones had also employed. Rather, it selectively privileged geological time over biblical chronology while extracting evidence useful for positivist knowledge. This process retrospectively flattened the complex coexistence of multiple universalities into a singular narrative of scientific progress.

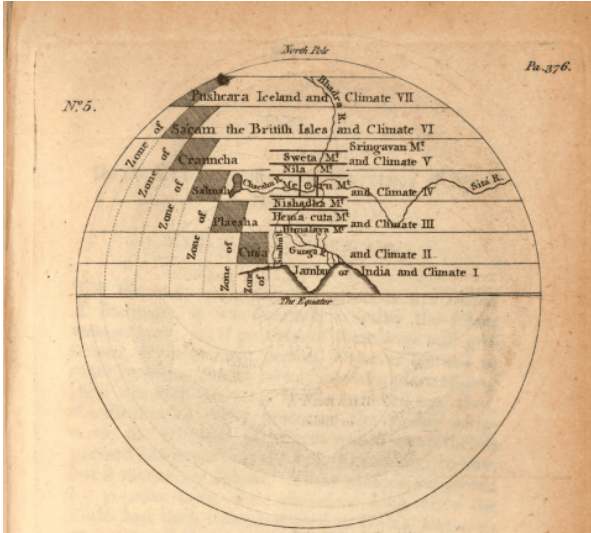


Image 2: A synthesis of three systems of geographical-cum-cosmographical knowledge.

Nineteenth-century scholarship was not kind to Wilford, and today this episode primarily serves as an example of fraught colonial relations, with the pandit's "blurred copy" subverting colonial science, perhaps even as resistance. While scholars like Leask interpret this event as "colonial mimicry," such readings treat Wilford's case as an anomaly rather than as evidence of broader patterns in colonial knowledge production. Rather than seeing Wilford's work simply as fraud or resistance, we should recognize how ethnographic methodologies like his created spaces where multiple knowledge systems could interact, producing new hybrid frameworks that do not fit neatly into later categorizations

of success or failure. This perspective challenges us to rethink not only Wilford's specific case but the entire historiography of colonial science and its relationship to modernity.



Egyptian Science, or Is It Hindu?

Modern Knowledge and Ancient History in Bengal

Twenty years before Wilford published his findings on the deep history of the world, a group of officials from the East India Company made their way to the royal court of a local Bengali king, Krishnachandra Ray. Krishnachandra was the landholder of the largest territory in Bengal and was an important player in local politics, though his influence and fortunes started to diminish as the colonial project kept encroaching upon landholdings and policies of Bengal after the battle of Plassey. In 1777, the company officials arrived at Krishnachandra's court with a set of questions regarding the Hindu science of astronomy, jyotishashastra, mathematics, and history.¹⁸ In the same spirit as the *relaciones* of New Spain, the company officials extended a questionnaire to

¹⁸ The documents have been recently brought to light in the Hastings archive at the British Library by Joshua Ehrlich. See Ehrlich, "New Lights on Raja Krishnachandra and Early Hindu-European Intellectual Exchange," 159–71.

Krishnachandra.¹⁹ The encounter with Krishnachandra was not merely a siphoning of information but a veritable exchange of ideas and frameworks.

Krishnachandra was well versed in several sciences, including astronomy. He owned Timurid astronomical tables and a European quadrant, showed keen interest in Newton's theories about tides and comets, and eagerly sought European scientific texts and instruments. He owned a copy of the *Zij-i Jadid Muhammad-Shahī*, a treatise on astronomy in Persian written by the Hindu ruler Sawai Jai Singh II of Amber.²⁰ Krishnachandra was able to recognize the figurative and mythological character of ancient Hindu geography. When asked why the Hindus believed Earth was triangular, Krishnachandra smiled and retorted: "That is a mere fable, there is no doubt but the Earth is round, and we have from time immemorial supposed it to be so. [E]ven the Sea is spherical, but a triangular figure has been ascribed to the Earth in some of our writings for the greater facility of classing and dividing the Different regions."²¹

But for all Krishnachandra's adherence to the tenets of early modern astronomical science, he still advanced a much-discussed position among orientalist scholars, which had also been the gateway for Wilford's universalist view of ancient geography of history: the purported connection between India and Egypt. When the company delegation suggested that sciences might have traveled from east to west through Egypt, Krishnachandra replied that "Egypt . . . is well known to us . . . [W]e have had an intercourse with its Inhabitants from time immemorial." He went even further, claiming there was "an extraordinary tradition amongst the Learned that even when by some accident, the Hindoo Books of Science were injured or destroyed they were recovered by Copies obtained from Egipt."²² These claims, like Wilford's identification of Śvetadvīpa with Albion, represent not simply factual assertions but attempts to construct heterotemporalities that could accommodate both Indian and European knowledge within a shared historical framework.

Unlike Jones, whose work on language became retrospectively framed as a "successful" discovery aligned with later frameworks, or Wilford, whose geographical connections were dismissed as errors or frauds, Krishnachandra's case reveals how heterotemporalities operated as conscious constructions that served intellectual and political purposes beyond truth claims. Rather than seeing his assertions about India-Egypt connections merely as strategic deceptions to advance political aims with the East India Company (which Ehrlich suggests), we can understand them as part of an active construction of alternative universals that allowed for the simultaneous operation of multiple knowledge systems.

Why Krishnachandra sought to create a different temporality is beyond the scope of this essay, something I will explore in a future publication. Nevertheless, we can observe the

¹⁹ For the use of *relaciones* in Mexico, see Jaime Marroquín, "The Method of Francisco Hernández: Early Modern Science and the Translation of Mesoamerica's Natural History."

²⁰ In his treaty, Jai Singh derided the founding figures of Western astronomy like Hipparchus, calling him "an ignorant clown," and claiming Ptolemy was "a bat who can never arrive at the sun of truth." He boasted about the superiority of Indian-made instruments and corrected some astronomical tables made in Paris by Phillipe de la Hire in 1689 and brought to India by the Jesuits. Such moments of scientific exchange are frequently cited in discussions of early modern South Asia to demonstrate both a shared development of scientific rationality and a brief period of intellectual coevalness between Europe and India before colonialism's rupture. See especially James Poskett, *Horizons: A Global History of Science*, 86–92.

²¹ The full transcript of the document is given in Ehrlich, "New Lights on Raja Krishnachandra and Early Hindu-European Intellectual Exchange." I have consulted the manuscript in the British Library, having learned about it from this article.

²² Ehrlich, "New Lights," 5.

effectiveness of Krishnachandra's constructed temporality. When Nathaniel Brassey Halhed published the first Bengali grammar for English speakers in 1778, he was keen on finding and discussing the "most authentic and ancient compositions" in Bengali. The text to which Halhed turned, extensively quoting from it, was the *Annadamangal* by Krishnachandra's court poet, Bharatchandra, which was less than thirty years old. Bharatchandra engaged in what we might call classicism, trying to incorporate classic elements of Sanskrit poetry into Bengali verse. However, this classicism created a truly innovative literary field, for never in the literary history of Bengal had Sanskrit meters supported Bengali words. Yet when literary scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries took stock of Bharatchandra's poetical prowess, they denounced it as an unimaginative token of the decadent and decaying Sanskritic culture.²³ Halhed's confusion of recent innovation for ancient tradition demonstrates how these alternative universals were not just theoretical exercises but the cause of tangible effects on how knowledge was catalogued, understood, and transmitted in colonial contexts.



Conclusion: Uncovering Early Modern Heterotemporalities

These four cases—Guaman Poma's llama, Jones's linguistic connections, Wilford's sacred geography, and Krishnachandra's Egypt-India ancient connections—collectively illuminate how colonial knowledge production operated through multiple, overlapping universalities rather than through a singular progression toward modern science. What unites these seemingly disparate examples is not just their shared biblical or mythological frameworks but their epistemological approach: each was engaged not in "discovering" new knowledge in the modern sense, but in "uncovering" connections long forgotten.

These heterotemporal frameworks emerged from the same methodological approaches—questionnaires, translations, collaborations with local scholars—that have been celebrated when they produced knowledge aligned with later scientific paradigms and dismissed when they did not. But rather than reinforcing teleological narratives that privilege knowledge based on its eventual alignment with modern science, these cases together challenge us to reconsider the temporal frameworks through which we understand early modern knowledge formation. What makes these alternative universals significant is not their accuracy by modern standards, but how they reveal the constructed nature of all universal frameworks, including our own. These four cases show us that we should read these attempts at alternative universals not through the harsh lens of periodicities imposed by modern historiography—including the framework of the early modern, which still sometimes puts excessive weight on precedent and continuity. They suggest a sophisticated crafting of new temporal frameworks, competing universalities that operated across colonial contexts, from the Andes to Bengal. We can apprehend the alternative universal in these cases only when we reconsider not just what constitutes knowledge—especially the fraught distinction between local and universal—but how it is temporally situated by both our modern frameworks and by the historical actors themselves, who actively theorized their own relationship to time, history, and universality across the colonial divide. [A]

²³ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language And Literature*, 621.